

'I am a number': Horace, Homer, and the walk-on in literature

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It is the heroes of epics, plays, and histories that attract out attention. But literature is full of walk-on characters. Luke Pitcher looks at the roles that these unsung characters play in both ancient and modern literature.

'You know, you people think you're the only ones on this island doing anything of value. I've got news for you. There were forty other survivors of this plane crash. And we are all people, too.'

The man who delivers the rant above is Leslie Arzt. Arzt is a teacher who, like others, has found himself trapped on a strange island by a plane crash. He is letting off steam because although this crash had forty-plus survivors, events on the island mysteriously unfold as though only a handful of these individuals are actually important.

There is a good explanation for this, of course. Arzt's rant happens in an episode of the TV show *Lost*. Many people did indeed survive the air-crash which sets the story of the series in motion. However, only a small number of these are the main characters of the drama. As far as the plot of the show is concerned, the remainder, Arzt included, are there for background colour. They fill out crowd-scenes, rush around looking purposeful in moments of crisis, and are killed from time to time to emphasize the island's unusual dangers. Arzt himself succumbs, shortly after his moment in the limelight, to a disastrous flirtation with a stick of dynamite.

In short, Arzt is a walk-on character. His particular pathos comes from his awareness, however dim, that this is what he is. It is disconcerting to think that you might just be part of the backdrop to the story of more interesting people.

Arzt's self-consciousness about his status as a bit-part player in the drama of *Lost* is the latest in a long line of attempts to tackle an issue in the morality of storytelling. From Homer downwards, texts have made decisions about which characters they are going to focus on, and which are going to flit in and out of the story with

less attention from the narrator. Should these decisions be taken as unproblematic, however? What follows if the narrator's view of who is important enough to follow in a story is modified, or rejected?

The view from the edge

It is interesting to see the results when a familiar story is subjected to just such a treatment. The plot of the *Wind in the Willows* can look very different if it is told from the perspective of the weasels, as in Jan Needle's *The Wild Wood*. *Jane Eyre* takes on a different complexion if one concentrates on the story of the first Mrs Rochester, as in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

One does not have to go as far as rewriting the original narrative altogether, though, for walk-on characters to have an impact. Minor figures in a story may resonate with an audience that feel themselves less than heroic precisely because they are minor figures. Twentieth-century poetry has numerous examples of this in action. T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock announces that he is 'not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be', but only 'an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two'; Larkin's reader of popular fiction in 'A Study of Reading Habits' finds, to his discomfort, that

the dude

*Who lets the girl down before
The hero arrives, the chap
Who's yellow and keeps the store
Seem far too familiar...*

Such manoeuvres are not unexpected in an age sceptical about grand narratives and who gets to decide the focus of attention. But the modern world did not discover the intriguing pull of the walk-on character.

The roots of this fascination go further back than one might think.

Ulysses: my part in his victory

The second poem in the first book of Horace's *Epistles* is addressed to Lollius Maximus. It records what the poet has learned from rereading Homer. Homer, or so Horace claims to Lollius, teaches moral lessons better than the philosophers.

The idea that Homer's heroes are types of virtuous behaviour was nothing new. Cicero in his treatise *On Duties* had already used Ulysses as an example of the man who spurns temptation in the pursuit of what is right. It is unsurprising, then, that Horace devotes some space in this poem to praising the character of the wandering hero.

However, there is an interesting twist. Ulysses may well be admirable. But Horace and his correspondent are not Ulysses. Their part in the story of the *Odyssey*, mapped onto real life, is much less glamorous:

*We are a crowd-scene, born to eat
the fruits of earth, Penelope's good-
for-nothing suitors, the youth at the
court of Alcinous...*

The basic point of this comparison is clear. Horace and Lollius, it is claimed, are currently too much like the less-than-admirable characters in the *Odyssey*: lazy, gluttonous, and addicted to pleasure. Immediately after this passage, Horace neatly segues into a rousing call for Lollius to wake up and take hold of his life.

The point of the comparison goes beyond that, however. The roles Horace assigns to himself and Lollius in Homer are not those of conspicuous individuals. Rather, their place is among the characters who are there – quite literally, in Horace's words – to make up the numbers. 'Nos numerus sumus'; 'we are a crowd-scene'.

Horace, then, both points to a characteristic of Homer's narrative and makes a droll observation from it. It is not just the

fact that the suitors or the court of Alcinous are a bit sleazy that gives the comparison its force. It is the fact that they are people whose role in the main narrative is to move the plot along, bulk out big scenes, and, in the case of the suitors, die picturesquely when the story demands it. They work so well as an analogy to Horace (keen, as often, to paint himself as someone on the sidelines) precisely because they are not the stars of the show. Eliot's attendant lords, and Larkin's coward at the counter, have their ancient parallels.

There is a further complication here, as well. The *Epistles* are letters. By definition, a letter brings into focus the relationship between the sender and the recipient, whose name usually features prominently near the start of the letter. Horace likens himself and Lollius to indiscriminate Homeric masses of people, to a 'numerus'. But he does so in a poetic context which highlights the relationship between two particular individuals. Letters can unfold the hidden interest of the sort of people on whom epic does not choose to linger.

People, too

The supporting cast is a feature of both ancient and modern narrative. Many stories founder if there is not a supply of characters who receive little attention in comparison to the heroes but who perform such necessary functions as standing in the background and easing the progress of the more important figures through the plot. This much is fairly obvious.

Less obvious is the fact that classical literature occasionally shows as much self-consciousness about this feature of narrative as anything from contemporary culture. The ancient novel, in particular, makes great play with it.

A nice example comes in the opening book of an ancient novel, written in the third century A.D., Heliodorus' *An Ethiopian Story*. Knemon, on being pressed by the hero and heroine of the work to talk about himself, is politely reluctant to make their tale any more complicated by bringing up his own:

Why do you batter and prise open these doors, to borrow a phrase from the tragedians? This is no time to introduce a new theme into your tragedy in the form of my misfortunes.

Knemon explicitly shows a strong sense of whose story this is meant to be.

Centuries separate the affable Athenian of Heliodorus from the exploding teacher of *Lost* (although both the novel and the TV show, interestingly enough, open up with a scene of carnage on a beach). Nonetheless, the feature of complex narratives which they both illuminate is a constant. However much heroes may hog

the limelight, it is always worth keeping an eye on the mook.

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